

*The Situation of the World at the Time  
of CHRIST'S Appearance, and its Con-  
nexion with the Success of his Religion,  
considered.*

A 2.  
S E R M O N

Preached before

The SOCIETY in *Scotland* for propaga-  
ting CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE,

At their ANNIVERSARY MEETING,

In the HIGH CHURCH of *EDINBURGH*,

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To which is subjoined, a short Account of the  
present State of the SOCIETY.

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M,DCC,LIX.





A  
S E R M O N

U P O N

*The Situation of the World at the Time  
of CHRIST'S Appearance, &c.*

COLOSS. i. 26.

*Even the Mystery, which hath been hid from Ages,  
and Generations, but now is made manifest to  
his Saints.*

**T**H E R E is no employment more delightful to a devout mind, than the contemplation of the divine wisdom, in the government of this world. The civil history of mankind opens a wide field for this pious exercise. Careful observers may often, by the light of reason, form probable

bable conjectures with regard to the plan of God's Providence, and can discover a skilful hand, directing the revolutions of human affairs, and compassing the best ends, by the most effectual and surprizing means: But sacred history, by drawing aside that veil which covers the counsels of the Almighty, lays open his designs to the view of his creatures, and we can there trace the steps which he taketh towards them, with more certainty, and greater pleasure. The facts which inspired writers relate, are no less instructive, than the doctrines which they teach. The latter inform us, that God is powerful, and wise, and good; the former discover those perfections brought forth into action, and confirm speculative opinions, by real and striking examples.

THE publication and establishment of Christianity in the world, is a remarkable event of this kind, and contributes greatly to illustrate and magnify the divine power and wisdom. From beginnings the most inconsiderable, and by instruments the most unlikely, the Almighty, with incredible facility, raised that glorious fabric of his Church, which hitherto hath withstood all the rage of his enemies, and *the gates of hell* we believe, *shall not prevail against it* \*. According

\* Matth. xvi. 18.

ing to our Saviour's beautiful image, *The least of all seeds grew up, and waxed a great tree, and spread out its branches, and filled the earth\**. The hand of God sheltered this feeble plant from the storm, and by his care it was reared, and cultivated, and brought to maturity. The wisdom and power of men united to oppose the doctrine of God: But it confounded the one, and overcame the other. Neither the bigotry of the Jews, nor the superstition of the Heathen, could resist its progress; and in vain did Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and people of Israel, gather themselves together against the Lord and his Anointed†.

MANY circumstances concurred in procuring, for Christianity, such a favourable reception, and firm establishment in the world. Whoever reflects upon the situation of mankind in that period, will find abundant reason to admire the divine wisdom, which disposed these circumstances with so much art, and improved them with such skill and success. The text naturally leads me to consider the conduct and administration of Providence, in this particular light. *The word of God, saith the Apostle, the mystery hid from ages, and from generations, is now made manifest to his saints.* Why was the gospel of Christ

\* Mark iv. 3.

† Acts iv. 27.



Christ so long concealed from the world? Why was it published at that time? What do we find in that particular juncture to render the discovery of the Christian religion more necessary, or the propagation of it more successful?

IN the following discourse, I shall endeavour to account for this part of the divine œconomy, by selecting some remarkable circumstances, in the situation of mankind, which prove that God *manifested the mystery of the gospel*, at a time when the world stood most in need of such a revelation, and was best prepared for receiving it.

THE appearance of Christ in so late an age, was an objection raised, by his antient adversaries, against the truth of his mission; and modern infidels have not failed to revive and urge it, with their usual confidence and triumph. But, if we can establish the truth of our general proposition, this cavil falls to the ground, and the divine conduct is fully vindicated.

† I. ABOUT the time of Christ's appearance, there prevailed a general opinion, that the Almighty would send forth some eminent messenger, to communicate a more perfect discovery of his will to mankind. The supreme Being conducteth all his operations by general laws. It seems to be one among

*these,*  
 Thus I doubt is not true. The Jews expected  
 the Messiah as a prince who should rule  
 the world — and from them the same expectation  
 through other nations. But it does not  
 of the clasp or other

these, that no perfection of any kind, can be attained of a sudden. The motion, by which his works advance towards their finished and compleat state, is gradual and progressive. This holds with regard to all the productions in the natural, and all the changes in the moral world. The same principle appears to have regulated the dispensations of religion. The light of revelation was not poured in upon mankind all at once, and with its full splendor. The obscurity of the dawn went before the brightness of the noon-day. The will of God was at first made known by revelations, useful indeed, but dark and mysterious. To these, succeeded others more clear and perfect. In proportion as the situation of the world made it necessary, the Almighty was pleased farther to open and unfold his scheme. And men came by degrees to understand this progressive plan of Providence, and to conceive how systems temporary and incompleat might serve to introduce that concluding and perfect revelation, which would *declare the whole council of God to man* \*.

The dignity of the person employed to publish this revelation, the virtues of his character, the glory of his kingdom, and the signs of his coming, were described by the  
antient

\* Acts xx. 27.

*expectations of an extraordinary time*

antient Prophets with the utmost perspicuity. Guided by this *sure word of prophecy*, the Jews of that age concluded the period predetermined by God, to be then compleated; and that the *fullness of time* being come, the promised Messiah would suddenly appear. Devout persons among them, *waited day and night for the consolation of Israel*\*; and the whole nation, groaning under the *Roman yoke*, and stimulated by the desire of liberty or of vengeance, expected their Deliverer, with the most anxious impatience.

NOR were these expectations peculiar to the Jews. By their dispersions among so many nations; by their conversation with the learned men among the Heathens; and by the translation of their inspired writings into a language almost universal; the principles of their religion were spread all over the East: and it became the common belief, that a Prince would arise at that time in *Judea*, who would change the face of the world, and extend his empire from one end of the earth to the other.

IN this *due time*, did the wisdom of God send forth his Son, not to assume any strange character, or to claim any new and unknown dignity, but to fulfil *all that had been spoken by the mouth of his holy Prophets since the world began*†.

While

\* Luke ii. 25, 38.

† Acts iii. 21.



While the eyes of men were employed in search of the promised Messiah; while they watched every sign that could indicate his coming; and observed every circumstance which could lead them to discover him; *while the earnest expectation of all creatures waited for the revelation of God*; at that happy and favourable juncture, was *the mystery hid from ages* manifested to the world. No wonder, the *Jews* should receive our Saviour, on his first appearance, not only without prejudice, but even with eagerness and applause: No wonder the Gentiles should *gather together unto him*, who had so long been *the desire of all nations* \*. Had Christ been manifested at a more early period, the world would not have been prepared to meet him with the same fondness and zeal: Had his appearance been put off for any considerable time, men's expectations would have begun to languish, and the warmth of desire, from a delay of gratification, might have cooled and died away.

II. BUT, it is not only from circumstances peculiar to the Jews and neighbouring nations, that we conclude the Christian religion to have been published at the most proper time: We propose to bring a farther confirmation of this truth, from a survey of the condition and circumstances of mankind in general. Let us venture then into this large

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field,

\* Gen. xlix. 18.

Hag. ii. 7.

field, and take a view of the political, of the moral, of the religious, and of the domestic state of the world.

WE begin, by considering the political state of the world about the time of our Saviour's appearance. The world, in the most early ages, was divided into small independent states, differing from each other in language, manners, laws, and religion. The shock of so many opposite interests, the interfering of so many contrary views, occasioned the most violent convulsions and disorders. Perpetual discord subsisted between these rival states; and hostility and bloodshed never ceased, during that turbulent and restless period. Commerce had not hitherto united mankind, and opened the communication of one nation with another. The world may now be considered as one vast society, closely cemented by mutual wants; each part contributing its share towards the subsistence, the pleasure, and improvement of the whole. But in those more simple ages, the intercourse between nations was extremely inconsiderable. Voyages into remote countries, in quest either of wealth or of knowledge, were very rare. Men moved in a narrow circle, little acquainted with any thing beyond the limits of their own small territory, and utter strangers to the condition and character of distant nations.

AT

• AT last the Roman ambition undertook the arduous enterprize of conquering the world, and conducted it with such refined policy, irresistible courage, and inimitable perseverance, as, in the end, crowned the attempt with success. *They trode down the kingdoms, according to Daniel's prophetic description, by their exceeding strength, they devoured the whole earth\**. However, by enslaving the world, they civilized it; and while they oppressed mankind, they united them together. The same laws were every where established, and the same languages understood. Men approached nearer to one another in sentiments and manners; and the intercourse between the most distant corners of the earth was rendered secure and agreeable. Satiated with victory, the first Emperors abandoned all thoughts of new conquests. Peace, an unknown blessing, was enjoyed thro'out all that vast empire; or if a slight war was waged on an outlying and barbarous frontier, far from disturbing the tranquillity, it scarce drew the attention of mankind.

• SUCH was the political state of the world, when Christianity made its first appearance; and, from this representation of it, many circumstances occur to justify the divine wisdom, in chusing that particular conjuncture, for

\* Dan. vii. 7, 23.



for publishing it. During the period, which I first described, the propagation of any new religion, must have been extremely slow and uncertain. How could it have forced its way, thro' innumerable difficulties, arising from the unsettled state of the world, from the fierceness and animosity of hostile and divided nations? The power of God, no doubt, could have surmounted all these obstacles: But it is observable, that this power is never exerted but on the most necessary occasions. The Almighty seldom effects, by supernatural means, any thing, which could have been accomplished by such as are natural. And were we to judge by maxims merely human, the propagation of Christianity, in those circumstances, would have proved not only a dangerous but an impossible enterprize.

BUT, favoured by the union and tranquillity of the *Roman* empire, the disciples of Christ executed their commission to great advantage. The success and rapidity, with which they diffused the knowledge of his name over the world, are astonishing. This epistle to the *Colossians*, was written about thirty years after our Saviour's ascension; and even then, the Apostle could assert, that the gospel had been preached to every creature which is under heaven\*, i. e. thro' the whole extent of the *Roman*

\* Col. i. 23.

*Roman* empire. Nations were then accessible, which formerly had been unknown. Under this situation, into which the Providence of God had brought the world, the joyful sound, in a few years, reached those remote corners of the earth, into which it could not, otherwise, have penetrated for many ages.

THIS view of our subject, presents to us an idea of the Christian religion, equal to the greatest and most magnificent conception of the human mind. The noblest people, that ever entered upon the stage of the world, appear to have been only instruments in the divine hand, for the execution of wise purposes, concealed from themselves. The *Roman* ambition and bravery paved the way, and prepared the world for the reception of the Christian doctrine: They fought and conquered, that it might triumph with the greater ease. *Howbeit, they meant not so, neither did their heart think so; but it was in their heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few\**. By means of their victories, the over-ruling wisdom of God established an empire, which really possesses that perpetuity and eternal duration, which they vainly arrogated to their own: He erected a throne which shall conti-

\* Isa. x. 7.

*nue for ever \**, and of the increase of that government there shall be no end†.

III. LET us consider the state of the world, with regard to morals. We cannot expect to find pure and undefiled virtue, among those people who were destitute of the instructions, the promises, and assistance of divine revelation. Unenlightened reason often errs: Undirected virtue frequently deviates from the right path. But, even in those less favoured ages, righteousness had not altogether perished from the earth; and the nations which had not the law, did by nature the things contained in the law‡. Those virtuous but feeble efforts of the human mind, were encouraged and seconded by several happy circumstances, in the situation of the world, owing in appearance to the sagacity of men, but ordained in reality by the wisdom of God. One of these was of a singular nature, and well deserves our particular attention.

WE have already mentioned the early division of the world into small independent states. These states, unbroken by the refinements of luxury, and animated with the noblest of human passions, struggled for liberty, and obtained it. Lawgivers, intimately acquainted with human nature, deep politicians, and lovers of mankind, arose in different places,

\* Heb. i. 8.

† Isa. ix. 7.

‡ Rom. ii. 14.



places, and founded those equal and happy governments, which have been the admiration and envy of all succeeding ages. Temperance, frugality, decency, public spirit, love to their fellow-citizens, magnanimity: These are the virtues which flourished under such wise institutions. At the same time, in those small commonwealths, the conduct of every citizen was subjected to the eye of the magistrate; and the nature of the government obliged him, to inspect their manners, with severity. The smallest crimes could not escape observation: Even dangerous virtues were exposed to censure. On this foundation of public liberty, did antient virtue rest; an effect of government little known in modern times, wherein the views of legislators are confined to inferior objects. But from this source, were derived all those splendid actions among the heathens, which, on the one hand, have been so invidiously mentioned by infidels, as a reproach to our holy religion, and on the other, so justly celebrated by Christians, in order to rouse the zeal and emulation of a degenerate age.

VIRTUE, however, did not long enjoy this temporary and precarious support. Those wise institutions were the works of men, and mortal like their authors. Some of them perished by the malignity of internal diseases:  
And,

And, if a vigorous constitution and more skilful management prolonged the period of others, they yielded at last to the violence of external injuries. It was impossible either to divert or resist the torrent of *Roman* power: It gathered strength from opposition, and bore down all nations before it. But, by subduing the world, the *Romans* lost their own liberty. Many causes, which it is not our present business to explain, concurred in producing this effect: Many vices, engendered or nourished by prosperity, delivered them over to the vilest race of tyrants that ever afflicted or disgraced human nature.

THE alliance between morals and government was now broken; and an influence hitherto so friendly to virtue, became altogether malignant, and was exerted with most fatal success, to poison and debase the human mind. Together with despotic power, entered all those odious vices, which are usually found in its train: and in a short time, they grew to an incredible pitch. The colours are not too strong, which the Apostle employs in drawing the character of that age: Cotemporary historians justify him, when he describes it *to be alienated from the life of God, walking in vanity thro' blindness of mind; to be past feeling, and given*  
up

*up to lasciviousness, and to work all uncleanness with greediness\*.*

IN this time of universal corruption, did the wisdom of God manifest the Christian revelation to the world, not to re-establish virtue upon the same insecure foundation of civil government; but to erect it upon the eternal and immoveable basis of a religion, which teacheth righteousness by the authority of God. What the wisdom of men could do for the encouragement of virtue in a corrupt world, had been tried during several ages; and all human devices were found, by experience, to be of very small avail: So that no juncture could be more proper for publishing a religion, which, independent on human laws and institutions, explains the principles of morals with admirable perspicuity, and enforces the practice of them by most persuasive arguments. Had not Christianity appeared to check and to mitigate the pernicious effects of despotic unlimited empire, it is hard to say how far they might have gone towards extinguishing the name and exercise of virtue among men. This we know, that in a most dissolute age, and under the worst government, the primitive Christians attained, in every virtue, to an eminence, of which there is no example in the history

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of

\* Ephes. iv. 17, 18, 19.



of mankind. The spirit of their religion, superior to the corrupt genius of the age, continued pure and vigorous; and men saw with admiration, that when every other foundation of virtue was overthrown, *the foundation of God stood sure, immoveable amidst the floods which came, the rains that descended, and the winds that blew and beat upon it* \*.

IV. LET us consider the world with regard to its religious state. The national character of the Jews, seems to have been deeply tinged with superstition. Their early education in *Egypt*, the example of neighbouring nations, the influence of the climate, but above all the perverseness of their own disposition, rendered this impression indelible. Obstinate against all the endeavours employed by their divine Lawgiver to repress or extirpate it, this superstitious spirit broke out on every occasion. Delighted with the ceremonial prescriptions of the law, the Jews utterly neglected the moral: And, fond of such rites as please the imagination, they undervalued those duties which improve the heart. This unhappy bias was greatly increased by the doctrine of the Pharisees, which reduced the prejudices of their countrymen into a regular system of superstition.

\* *Matth. viii. 25.*

perstition. By their vain traditions, they added to the load of ceremonies: By their wretched interpretations of the law, they abridged the number of moral precepts. They openly preferred the former before the latter; and substituted observances frivolous and insignificant, in the place of *the weighty matters in the law, judgment, mercy, and faith* \*.

WHILE the Pharisees undermined religion, on one hand, their rivals the Sadducees carried on, from another quarter, a more bold and impious attack against it. By denying the immortality of the soul, they wounded religion in a vital part; and overturned the doctrine of future rewards and punishments, which hath been, and must ever be, the chief foundation of virtuous obedience. The practice of these two contending sects, was perfectly suitable to their principles: The followers of the one, were scandalous libertines; the disciples of the other, notorious hypocrites: And between them, the knowledge and power of true religion were intirely destroyed. It was high time then for the wisdom of God to vindicate his injured law, and to revive languishing and decayed religion, among his ancient people. To recal the Jews from their former wanderings, the Almighty had with success employed the ministry of his  
holy

\* Matth. xxiii. 23.

holy Prophets : But the malignant distempers of that age, would not have yielded to any common remedy : A conceited and perverse generation would have listened to no inferior messenger ; and therefore, the great Prophet was sent forth in this due time, to explain, to extend, and to perfect the law, *and to fill Zion with judgment and righteousness* \*.

BUT the deplorable situation of the heathen world with regard to religion, called still more loudly for an immediate interposition of the divine hand. • I shall not mention the characters of the heathen deities, infamous for the most enormous crimes ; nor describe their religious worship, consisting frequently in the vilest and most shameful rites. Certain it is, the more any man honoured such gods, the worse himself was ; and the oftner he served them, the more wicked he would become.

• THE spirit and genius of heathen religion are what I shall endeavour to represent. These, according to the Apostle's observation, were *in all things too much superstitious* †. / State-ly temples, expensive sacrifices, pompous ceremonies, magnificent festivals, with all the other circumstances of shew and splendor, were the objects which false religion presented to its votaries : But just notions of God, obedience to his moral laws, purity of heart, and

\* Isa. xxxiii. 5.

† Acts xvii. 23.



and sanctity of life, were not once mentioned as ingredients in religious service. Superstition never prevailed among any people, but at the expence of morals. The heathen superstition, far from giving any aid to virtue, seems not to have had the least connection with it. No repentance of past crimes, no future amendment of conduct, are ever prescribed by it, as proper means of appeasing their offended deities. "Sacrifice a chosen victim; bow down before an hallowed Image; be initiated in the sacred mysteries; and the wrath of the gods shall be averted, and the thunder shall drop from their hands." Suitable to these sentiments, is the behaviour of *Balak* King of *Moab*, described by the Prophet *Micah*. That Prince had provoked the God of *Israel*; and in order to regain his favour, thought of the same means, which superstition employs to mitigate the rage of its false gods. *Wherewith, says he, shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body, for the sin of my soul\*? To do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, were acceptable services,*  
which

\* Micah vi. 6, 7, 8.

which made no part in the system of heathen religion.

HAPPILY, the wisdom and simplicity of antient government, checked the progress of this infectious principle, and corrected, in some degree, its poisonous and destructive qualities. But, no sooner had the tyranny of the *Roman* Emperors removed this restraint, by subverting liberty,<sup>†</sup> than superstition made its advances on the world by sudden and mighty steps, and exercised an uncontrolled dominion in every corner of the earth. Tyranny and superstition, like those other destroyers of mankind, famine and pestilence, are nearly allied. Superstition breaks the spirit, and prepares it for servitude. Tyranny, for this reason, encourages superstition, and employs it as an useful auxiliary to illegal power. [Accordingly, *Rome* adopted the gods of almost every nation, whom she had conquered; and opened her temples to the grossest superstitions of the most barbarous people. *Her foolish heart being darkened, she changed the glory of the uncorruptible God, into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds and four-footed beasts, and creeping things*\*.

At this time, therefore, did a good God, in pity to his deluded creatures, publish the Christian

\* Rom. i. 21, 23.

*Did superstition in fact prevail  
in the world after it was subdued  
the Romans? I think not.*

Christian revelation. By it, the God of truth was made known; *and the idols of the nations were moved at his presence*\*. Rational and sublime in its doctrines, humane and beneficent in its precepts, pure and simple in its worship; Christianity was better calculated than any other religion, to repress the inroads of superstition, and to establish an acceptable and manly devotion, consisting *in spirit and in truth*†. No period can be mentioned, when instruction in these important articles, would have been more seasonable or necessary. The absurd fictions, and abominable practices of superstition, had gone near to extinguish the natural sentiments of the human mind, concerning the supreme Being, and to banish his name and worship from the earth. No wonder, men, under these circumstances, should listen, with joy, to the Christian revelation, which delivered them from that hateful yoke, and taught them, *to serve God without fear, in holiness, and righteousness before him*‡.

V. LET us consider the world with regard to its domestic situation; a view, perhaps, less extensive and magnificent than those, which hitherto have engaged our attention; but not less important. The private and domestic situation of mankind, is the chief circumstance, which

\* Isa. xix. 1.

† John iv. 24.

‡ Luke i. 74.



which forms their character, and becomes the great source of their happiness or misery. Any poison in this fountain, communicates itself to the manners of men; any bitterness there, infects all the pleasures of life. Many circumstances, of the most fatal influence on domestic virtue and happiness, occur to attentive observers of the period under review.

DOMESTIC society is founded in the union between husband and wife. Among all civilized nations, this union hath been esteemed sacred and honourable; and from it are derived those exquisite joys or sorrows, which can imbitter all the pleasures, or alleviate all the pains in human life. In the antient world, there prevailed two practices equally pernicious to the peace and happiness of the married state. From the most early times, polygamy seems to have been universal among the eastern nations; and men married as many wives, as their fancy wished for, or their fortune could maintain. Now, this practice not only appears to be contrary to the intention of the Almighty, who at first created but one person of each sex, and hath since preserved an admirable proportion between the number of males and females, whom he sends into the world; but, by it, likewise, were banished from domestic life, all those enjoyments which sweeten and endear it. Friendship,  
social

social intercourse, confidence, and the mutual care of children, were utterly unknown: On the one hand, rigour, voluptuousness, jealousy; on the other, subjection without love, fidelity, or virtue. One half of the human species became the property of the other; and the husband, instead of being the friend and protector of a wife, was no better than the master and tyrant over a slave. The envy and discord which were introduced into the families of *Jacob* and *Elkanah*, by a plurality of wives, are but imperfect pictures of the enormities occasioned by the same practice, under masters less virtuous, and in ages more dissolute and luxurious. Wherever the Christian religion is established, an end hath been put to an institution so inconsistent with the felicity of domestic life. Marriage, suitable to the ordinance of God, is rendered a friendly and indissoluble alliance between two persons; and tranquillity, confidence, and joy bless an union, begun and cemented by mutual love.

IN the western parts of the world, the maxims with regard to marriage were more conformable to nature: One man was confined to one woman: But at the same time, their laws allowed a practice, which introduced the most fatal disorders into domestic life. The Almighty, *because of the hardness of their*  
D *hearts,*

*hearts*, permitted the Jews, on certain occasions, *to give a writing of divorcement to their wives*\*. According to their usual custom, the Jews stretched this indulgence to most extravagant lengths; and, defining the cases in which they pretended divorces to be lawful, with a minute and over-curious accuracy, they altogether perverted the institution of God. Their Doctors permitted divorces for causes so trivial and ridiculous, as cannot be mentioned in a grave discourse. The utmost dissolution of manners, was the effect of such licentious opinions: And our Saviour found the abuses to be grown so enormous, as to render the strictest and most precise limitations of the *Mosaic* precept absolutely necessary.

NOR was this matter on any better footing among the heathen nations. Divorces, on very slight pretences, were permitted both by *Greek* and *Roman* legislators. And tho' the pure manners of those republics, restrained, for some time, the operation of such a pernicious institution; tho' the virtue of private persons seldom abused the indulgence which the laws allowed them: Yet no sooner had the progress of luxury, and the establishment of despotic power, vitiated the taste of men, than the law with regard to divorces, was found

\* Mark x. 4, 5.



found to be among the worst corruptions which prevailed in that abandoned age. The facility of separations rendered married persons careless of obtaining or practising those virtues which render domestic life tranquil and delightful. The education of children was utterly neglected by parents, who often met together with a scheme of separation in both their thoughts. Marriage, instead of restraining, added to the violence of irregular desire; and under a legal name, became the vilest and most shameless prostitution. From all these causes, the married state fell into disreputation and contempt; and it became necessary, to force men, by penal laws, into a society where they expected no secure or lasting happiness. Among the *Romans*, domestic corruption grew, of a sudden, to an incredible height; and perhaps, in the history of mankind, we can find no parallel to the undisguised impurity and licentiousness of that age\*. It was in a good time, therefore, that our Saviour abolished a practice, which had been one of the most fertile sources of these disorders. The bonds of the marriage-union were, by him, rendered almost indissoluble; and the *corde of love* were drawn as close as possible. Political projectors may please themselves with imaginary advantages,

resulting

\* Rom. i. 26, &c.

resulting from the liberty of divorces; but reason, as well as the experience of mankind, justify the wisdom of the divine decree concerning them. If the manners of men be not extremely pure and simple, the least indulgence in this article hath always proved fatal to the peace and virtue of domestic life; and whatever remains of these we now find in a dissolute age, must be intirely ascribed to that regulation in the gospel\*, which superficial reasoners represent as a grievance, tho' it be in truth the greatest blessing to mankind.

If the lives of those, who are at the head of domestic society, needed reformation; the sufferings of those who were subject to them merited relief.

So many are the wants of human society, that far the greater part of mankind is condemned to constant toil and labour in order to supply them. In the antient world, the condition of this numerous and useful race of men, differed widely from that, wherein they are now placed. They were not freemen, but slaves, who occupied the inferior, tho' necessary, station in human life. Their labour, was not a voluntary duty to the society, which intitled them to a reward; it was an hard task, imposed without their consent, and exacted with the utmost rigour. The  
number

\* Matth. v. 32.

number of persons, reduced to this unhappy condition, was immense. In those parts of the world, whose history and situation are best known, above two thirds of the whole inhabitants are computed to have been in a state of slavery. The persons, the goods, the children of these slaves were the property of their masters, disposed of at pleasure, and transferred, like any other possession, from one hand to another. No inequality of condition, no superiority in power, no pretext of consent, can justify this ignominious depression of human nature, or can confer upon one man, the right of dominion over the person of another: But not only doth reason condemn this institution as unjust; experience proved it to be pernicious both to masters and slaves. The elevation of the former, inspired them with pride, insolence, impatience, cruelty, and voluptuousness: The dependent and hopeless state of the latter, dejected the human mind, and extinguished every generous and noble principle in the heart. Were I to mention the laws and regulations of the most civilized states among the antients, concerning these unfortunate sufferers; were I to relate the treatment which they met with, from persons the most renowned for their virtue; maxims so inhumane, and actions so barbarous, would excite the strongest pity



ty and indignation, in an age, which never beheld the tyranny of the oppressor, nor heard the groans of the captive.

IT is true, while men enjoyed those wise institutions of government, which we formerly described, the state of servitude did not become altogether intolerable; many expedients were used for mitigating the rigour of command, and lightening the yoke of obedience: But, upon establishing despotic government in the *Roman Empire*, domestic tyranny rose, in a short time, to an astonishing height. In that rank soil, every vice, which power nourishes in the great, or oppression engenders in the mean, thrived and grew up apace.

HERE then is an object worthy the attention of that merciful God, *who delivereth the soul of the afflicted from violence, who beareth the cry of the needy, and him who hath no helper*\*. The groans of such an innumerable multitude of his reasonable creatures, bereaved of the noblest privilege of their nature, liberty and independence, would not, we may believe, be uttered in vain. He could not always *keep silence and be still*, when he beheld their wretched situation, so destructive of happiness, and so fatal to virtue. At last, the divine wisdom interposed; and when the evil

\* Psal. lxxii. 12.

evil had become intolerable, and seemed to be past cure, the promulgation of Christianity brought an effectual and timely remedy.

It is not the authority of any single detached precept in the gospel, but the spirit and genius of Christian religion, more powerful than any particular command, which hath abolished the practice of slavery thro' the world. The temper, which Christianity inspired, was mild and gentle; and the doctrines it taught, added such dignity and lustre to human nature, as rescued it from the dishonourable servitude into which it was sunk. All men, of every condition, are declared to be the offspring of the same God, and the heirs of the same heavenly inheritance: One Saviour redeemed them from iniquity by his death, and one Spirit worketh powerfully in their hearts. Where-ever such opinions prevail, no human creature can be regarded as altogether insignificant and vile; even the meanest acquire dignity; exterior distinctions disappear; and men approach nearer to that original equality, in which they were at first placed, and are still viewed by their impartial Creator.

What a wonderful and blessed change hath Christianity produced in the face of the world! Together with the knowledge of it, liberty, humanity, and domestic happiness,  
diffused

diffused themselves over every corner of the earth. It is deemed a virtue, to admire and praise those illustrious personages, who delivered mankind from the rage of tyrants, and vindicated the violated laws and constitution of their country: And is no admiration due to the generous spirit of that religion, which restored liberty, not to one nation or society alone, but rescued from the worst servitude, far the greater number of the human race, and acquired for them that happy freedom, which they still enjoy? When we behold Christianity making its progress thro' the world, and working every where, such an important alteration in the condition of mankind; we may well apply to a temporal deliverance, what the Prophet spoke concerning a spiritual salvation: *Behold the acceptable year of the Lord is come! Liberty is proclaimed to the captive, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; they shall rest from their sorrow, and from their fear, and from the hard bondage wherein they were made to serve* \*.

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\* Isa. lxi. 1. xiv. 3.

The permission of slavery in our *American* colonies, is a specious, not a real objection against the reasoning under this head. The genius and tendency of any religion are known by the operations of its vigorous, not of its declining age: And if avarice hath revived, in a degenerate world, an institution, which Christianity had utterly abolished; this, like many other vices which prevail among Christians, must be charged upon the corruption of the human heart, not upon that religion, which testifies against it.



THE abolition of domestic slavery was the occasion of another change in the manners of men, which is no less remarkable. Captives taken in war, were, in all probability, the first persons subjected to perpetual servitude: And when the necessities or luxury of mankind increased the demand for slaves, every new war recruited their number, by reducing the vanquished to that wretched condition. Hence proceeded the fierce and desperate spirit, with which wars were carried on among antient nations. While chains and slavery were the certain lot of the conquered, battles were fought and towns defended with a rage and obstinacy, which nothing but horror at such a fate could have inspired: But by putting an end to the cruel institution of slavery, Christianity extended its mild influences to the practice of war; and that barbarous art, softened by its humane spirit, ceased to be so destructive. Secure, in every event, of personal liberty, the resistance of the vanquished became less obstinate, and the triumph of the victor less cruel. Thus humanity was introduced into the exercise of war, with which it appears to be almost incompatible; and it is to the merciful maxims of Christianity, much more than to any other cause, that we must ascribe the little ferocity and bloodshed, which accompany modern victories.

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Even where the passions of men are fiercest, and most highly inflamed, the powerful genius of our religion interposes, restrains the fury of war, and sets bounds to its destroying rage. The benevolent spirit of the gospel, delivereth the captive from his fetters, *looseth those who were appointed to death* \*, and *saith to the sword that is ready to devour, Return into thy scabbard, and be still* †.

It hath become a fashionable topic among political reasoners, to celebrate the mildness and humanity of modern manners, and to prefer the character of present times, in that respect, before the antient: To what cause shall we ascribe this important revolution, in the sentiments and dispositions of mankind? Not to the influence of better instituted governments; † for in legislative wisdom the antients far excelled us: ✕ Not to the effects of a better-directed education; that duty, shamefully neglected by us, was among them an object of chief attention: Not to our superior refinements in elegant and polite arts; there we must be content to equal without pretending to surpass the antients. The Christian religion, *hid from ages, but now manifested to the world*, is the only cause capable of producing so great an effect. *That wisdom which is from above, is pure, and peaceable, gentle, easy*

to

\* Psal. cii. 20.

† Jer. xlvii. 7.

*† This is not entirely true, for no government is equal to our own. ✕*

*to be intreated, full of mercy*\*. Genuine Christianity is distinguished above all other religions, by the mildness of its spirit: The enemy of every practice which hardens the heart: The encourager of every virtue, which renders the character humane. Where-ever it hath been established in purity, and practised with zeal; *kindness, long-suffering, meekness, charity* †, are the graces which accompany it. Even the vices and inventions of men, which have mingled themselves with the truths of God, have not been able intirely to destroy their effects. Under all disadvantages, the genius of the gospel exerts itself, civilizing the fiercest and most barbarous nations, and inspiring a gentleness of disposition, unknown to any other religion. Together with the best spiritual blessings, the most valuable temporal mercies have been communicated to the world, by Christianity. It not only sanctifies our souls, but refines our manners; and while it gives the promises of the next life, it improves and adorns the present: That happy change, which the wisdom of man could not effect, God in his good time accomplished by *manifesting to the world the mystery hid from ages and generations*.

THESE

\* Jam. iii. 17.

† Col. iii. 12.



THESE observations, which we have made, suggest many useful reflections, with regard to the future and universal propagation of Christian knowledge. At the time when the disciples of Christ set out, in obedience to their Lord's command, *to teach all nations*; no undertaking could appear in the judgment of man more wild and improbable: But, besides the blessing of God, which accompanied them where-ever they went, we have discovered several circumstances in the situation of the world, which contributed powerfully towards the success and facility of their enterprize. Aided by these, *the word of God increased, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly* \*. *The weakness of God became stronger than men*; and in a short time, he enabled the foolish things of the world, to confound the wise; the weak things of the world, to confound the things which are strong; and things that are not, to bring to nought things that are †. That the same effectual blessing of God still continueth to second every sincere and vigorous attempt, to spread the knowledge of his name, we have good reason to believe. What powerful unknown causes may co-operate with this blessing of the Almighty, we are not yet permitted to discover. It cannot, however, be more improbable, that the influences of

\* Acts vi. 7.

† 1 Cor. i. 25, 27, 28.

of Christianity shall reach farther, than it once was, that they should reach so far. And, after we have seen the light of the gospel penetrate into so many *dark places of the earth*; why doth it seem incredible, that its splendor should, at last, fill the world, and scatter the remainder of darkness which covereth the nations?

It is obvious to observe one circumstance, which cannot fail of introducing the gospel into distant nations with great advantage. That part of the world, wherein Christianity is established, infinitely surpasses the rest in all the sciences and improvements which raise one nation above another in reputation or power. Of this superiority the *Europeans* have availed themselves to the utmost, in every project for extending their empire or commerce; and have brought a great part of the globe into a dependence, either upon their arts or arms. Now, these same attainments in science or policy, might be employed to good purpose, on the side of religion: and tho' hitherto subservient to the designs of interest or ambition, may we not flatter ourselves, that, at last, they shall become noble instruments in the hand of God, for preparing the world to receive the gospel?

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THIS glorious prospect may be distant; but it is not imaginary. Even in a degenerate age, zealous and active spirits have arisen, and societies have been formed, upon the generous plan of propagating the knowledge of Christ to nations *far off, which never heard his fame, nor have seen his glory* \*. What they have already done, encourages the most sanguine hopes of farther success. And, if it shall please God to increase the number, and *strengthen the hands*, of such well-disposed persons: If he shall see fit, *to hasten his time when one shall become a thousand, and a small one strong* †: Then might we expect that *the knowledge of the Lord would fill the earth, as the waters cover the sea* ‡; that *the desert would blossom as the rose* ||, and *the wilderness become a fruitful field* \*\*: Then might the spirit of Christianity, which languishes so visibly in those places where it hath long been planted, revive with new vigour in unknown lands, and shine with its first splendor, among *the people who now sit in darkness and in the region and shadow of death* ††: Then might *the solitary place rejoice* ‡‡, *the barren break forth into singing* ||||, and *the tongue of the dumb praise the Lord* \*\*\*.

BUT

\* Isa. lxvi. 19.

† Isa. lx. 2.

‡ Ibid. xi. 9.

|| Ibid. xxxv. 1.

\*\* Ibid. xxxii. 15.

†† Matth. iv. 16.

‡‡ Isa. xxxv. 1.

|||| Ibid. liv. 1.

\*\*\* Ibid. xxxv. 6.



BUT the conversion of distant nations, is not the chief care of the Society for propagating Christian Knowledge: An object nearer at hand demands their more immediate attention. The Highlands and Islands of *Scotland* present to us a scene, which we would little expect in a nation where true religion and polished manners have long flourished. There, society still appears in its rudest and most imperfect form: Strangers to industry, averse from labour, inured to rapine; the fierce inhabitants scorn all the arts of peace, and stand ready for every bold and desperate action. Attached to their own customs, from ignorance and habit, they have hitherto continued a separate people. And tho' the religion established among them be the same which we enjoy, its progress hath been imperfect; and the fixed Pastors were never able to surmount the disadvantages of their situation, or the obstinacy of their people. In this neglected field, the enemies of our religion and liberty have sown the seeds of the worst superstition and the most pernicious principles of government.

THIS field, the Society have occupied; and have endeavoured by their pious care, to render many of their deluded countrymen good Christians and useful subjects. Happily for them, they do not labour alone in this noble work.

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The reformation of the Highlands was never totally neglected by the legislature: But roused by a late danger, it hath since merited their more particular attention. Suitable to this view, laws have been enacted with a most humane spirit, in order to retrieve that part of the kingdom from ignorance and barbarism, and to introduce the same regular government and independence which are the blessings of other *British* subjects. From these salutary laws, the Society expect great assistance, in the prosecution of their design.

In the mean time, they adore the divine goodness which hath opened the hearts of many charitable persons among ourselves and neighbours, whose liberality hath put it in their power to carry on their plan with vigour and success; enabling them not only to begin a good work, but in many places to bring it to great perfection. What a reproach will it be to an age, wherein no hand is backward to supply the most extravagant demands of luxury and pleasure, if this generous undertaking shall languish and decay for want of support! The pleasures, after which a giddy generation run, are unworthy to be compared with that sacred joy which fills the heart of a Christian who hath been instrumental in rescuing an immortal soul from vice, in adorning it with virtue, in  
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seasoning it with grace, in manifesting the mystery of the gospel to those from whom it was hid, and in feeding the hungry with the bread of life. If we ourselves have tasted of the heavenly gift, if we have passed from death to life, and have not only heard the sound, but felt the power of the gospel; the greater will be our zeal in communicating the same glad tidings to others, that they also may be persuaded to fly for refuge to the consolations which are in Christ: If honour to our blessed Redeemer be the leading principle in our hearts, we will never rest satisfied, till his glory fill the earth, and every knee bow to his sacred name. By endeavouring thus to bless others, we shall draw down the divine blessing upon ourselves. *They that be wise, shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness, as the stars for ever and ever* \*.

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\* Dan. xii. 3.





# S T A T E

OF THE

## SOCIETY IN SCOTLAND,

For propagating CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE,  
for the Year 1754.

THE piety and zeal of a few private persons, gave rise to this Society, about the year 1700. The propagation of Christian Knowledge, among their countrymen in the Highlands of *Scotland*, was the only object which they at first proposed to themselves. A design so laudable merited public encouragement; and, in 1709, they were erected into a body corporate by letters-patent from Queen *Anne*. The donations, which they have received, since that time, from charitable persons both among ourselves and our neighbours, have enabled them to carry on their scheme with considerable success.

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By settling schools in the most remote corners of the Highlands, where children are instructed in the principles of true religion, they have in a great measure defeated the pernicious activity of the Popish missionaries: By teaching the children under their care to speak and read the *English* language, they have made some progress towards incorporating those who formerly spoke only the *Irish* tongue with the rest of the Island: By instilling into their minds an early knowledge of the Christian doctrines, they hope by degrees to reclaim them from that fierce and barbarous course of life, which is so contrary to the humane and gentle spirit of the gospel.

THE funds of the Society are not considerable; but they have endeavoured to supply this defect by the most frugal œconomy, which hath put it in their power to prosecute their plan, to an extent far beyond what they could have expected. Near 70,000 persons have been educated by the Society since its first commencement. At present, their schools amount to the number of 155, at which no fewer than 5831 children are educated. These schools are under the immediate inspection of the Presbyteries, in whose bounds they lie. Whoever is acquainted with the geography of the country,  
will



will find them to be situated in the wildest, and least civilized places of the Highlands and Islands. And, could the funds of the Society permit, schools might be opened with no less advantage, in many other places of that extensive country.

To change the manners of a whole people, must be the work of unwearied perseverance and attention. Attached by habit and example to the customs of their ancestors, the children educated by the Society were too ready to forget the good principles which they had been taught; and the love of idleness and rapine often wore out the impressions which religion and virtue had made in their minds. In order to provide a remedy for this, the Society applied for a new charter, which they obtained in 1738; and by it, they are impowered to instruct the children under their care in the different parts of agriculture, trade, and manufactures. To the execution of that part of their plan, they have reckoned themselves impowered to apply those sums, which, by the express destination of the Donor, are not appropriated for the other ends of the Society. And now, when these sums have amounted to something worth notice, they are beginning to lay them out in this way. But those funds which belonged to the Society previous to the date of

of their new charter, and whatever new donations are granted them to be employed in the religious education of youth, they still apply with the utmost fidelity to that purpose alone. For these reasons, the progress of the Society, in this part of their undertaking, must needs be gradual. However, the attempts which they make, have been attended with such success, as abundantly justifies the wisdom of the scheme. Happily, these two branches of their design are intimately connected. Where-ever true Christianity is established, it improves, adorns, and perfects human society. Religion and industry go hand and hand, strengthen and establish one another. Conformable to the spirit of their second patent, the Society, since the commencement of the year 1755, have engaged to support a design, which seems greatly to merit the public attention and encouragement.

THE Honourable Board of Trustees for improving the manufactures and fisheries in *Scotland*, have agreed to employ part of their funds in settling small colonies of linen-manufacturers in different parts of the Highlands. The station of one of these colonies, they have fixed at *Lochcarron*, a place which by its situation appears to be very proper for that purpose. The Trustees have already provided

provided a sufficient number of manufacturers for this new settlement, and have appointed skilful overseers to direct them. The Proprietor of the lands of *Lochcarron*, who hath given all the encouragement in his power to this laudable undertaking, represented to the Trustees, that besides the different tradesmen employed by them, in the linen-manufactory, a schoolmaster well-qualified for instructing youth, a blacksmith, a shoemaker, a cart-wright, and a ploughman, would be of great advantage to this infant-colony. However much the Trustees approved this proposal, they could contribute nothing towards the execution of it. The funds under their management are appropriated by act of Parliament for the encouragement of the linen-manufactory and the fisheries; and they had no powers to employ them for any other purpose, however necessary. But, by their direction, the Proprietor applied to the Society for propagating Christian Knowledge, in order to obtain their charitable assistance to promote so good a design.

THE Society, whose funds have been raised intirely by private contributions, were not limited by the same restrictions which bound the Trustees. The design appeared to them to be useful and well-concerted: It  
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is perfectly suitable to the spirit and intention of their second patent: It tends evidently to encourage religion, virtue, and industry in the Highlands. They resolved, therefore, to promote it in the most effectual manner that their funds would permit. For this purpose, besides a schoolmaster, whom they have settled at *Lochcarron*, they agreed to allow considerable yearly salaries to a blacksmith, a shoemaker, a cart-wright, and a ploughman, who are to be employed by them for five years. The ploughman is to instruct, *gratis*, all that offer themselves; and the others are obliged to instruct a number of apprentices, and to give maintenance at bed and board to them, if the Society finds that expedient, at a reasonable rate, to be paid by the Society. And if, in other places of the Highlands, the same plan could be followed out, the inhabitants, who have hitherto been burdensome to the nation, from idleness, or formidable by their activity, might at last become useful, industrious, and valuable members of society.

BESIDES their endeavours towards the instructing and improving the Highlands, the Society have of late been engaged in a new and more extensive undertaking. The late Dr. *Williams*, and some other well-disposed persons in *England*, confiding in the prudence  
and

and fidelity of the Society, have committed to their management certain sums which they ordain to be employed for the instruction of the *Indians* in *America*. Conformable to their pious intentions, the Society have dispatched Missionaries into that country; and tho', in so wide and neglected a field, the industry of a few labourers can produce no great or sudden effect, yet, from their success, it is evident, that, with proper cultivation, a blessed and joyful increase might be expected.

THERE are indeed many obstacles, which retard the propagation of Christianity in that corner of the world. Among the *Indians*, in the neighbourhood of our colonies, society is still in its simplest form: They lead the unsettled life of savages, who support themselves by hunting, and wander from one place to another in quest of game: They are divided into many small tribes, differing from each other in language and in manners: Attached to their own superstitious rites, they discover great aversion for the Christian religion, which is but ill-recommended to them by the example of many who profess it.

NOTWITHSTANDING all these disadvantages, the Society have the pleasure to hear from Mr. *Brainerd* their Missionary, that many among the *Indians* whom he hath formed into a Christian congregation, still con-

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tinue *stedfast and immoveable* in the profession of the gospel: And he is not without good hopes of adding to their number by his diligence and care.

AT a time, when the friendship of the *Indian* nations appears to be of so great consequence towards the security and preservation of our *American* colonies, no attempt to instruct them, however feeble, ought to be regarded with indifference. Every person among them, whom we gain over to the belief and practice of true Christianity, becomes from that moment the ally of *Britain*, and is bound to its interest by a powerful and sacred tie.

FROM this brief account of the intention and management of the Society for propagating Christian Knowledge, they flatter themselves, that the former will be esteemed commendable, and that in the latter they cannot justly incur the imputation either of imprudence or unfaithfulness.

EVERY good man will bless God who hath honoured the Society to be his instruments for publishing the gospel of Christ to so many persons who must otherwise have *perished for lack of knowledge*: And every man capable of reflection, will approve institutions of this nature which contribute so much to prepare the world for the full manifestation  
of



*of the mystery hid from ages and generations;  
when the deaf shall hear the words of the book,  
and the eyes of the blind shall see out of ob-  
scurity and out of darkness; when the meek  
shall increase their joy in the Lord, and the  
poor among men shall rejoice in the Holy One  
of Israel.*

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